

## **Welcome to *Revenant: Critical and Creative Studies of the Supernatural***

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Revenant*. *Revenant* is concerned with the supernatural in all its manifestations, forms and guises. The supernatural encompasses a vast array of phenomena, experiences, fictions and histories, so it is unsurprising that ideas about what exactly is ‘supernatural’ are various, multiple and shifting. Whilst I do not usually use dictionary definitions, the phrasing in the Oxford dictionary is of interest. Here the supernatural is said to be that which is ‘beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature’ ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)). The use of the word ‘beyond’ is telling. The supernatural is not opposed to science or the laws of nature rather it is *further* than these things. The supernatural is the ‘über’, ‘in excess of’ or ‘beyond’, yet it is not entirely separate from either science or nature. The word ‘super-natural’ of course includes the ‘natural’ and in many historical and contemporary discussions the supernatural is understood not as separate from nature but as an integral part of it; as Timothy Morton has termed it, ‘extra Nature’ (2010). This idea of the supernatural being a part of nature has been around for hundreds of years. In 1848 the prominent chronicler of supernatural phenomena, Catherine Crowe, wrote in her compendium of people’s ‘real’ experiences of the paranormal, *The Night Side of Nature*, ‘of the phenomena in question, I do not propose to consider them as supernatural; on the contrary I am persuaded that the time will come, when they will be reduced strictly within the bounds of science’ (22). Crowe was not alone in her belief either then or now. The Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882 is still engaged in investigations, the University of York has an Anomalous Experience Research Unit and the Parapsychological Association is a strong and growing organisation with many university affiliations. On its website the Association states that ‘The primary objective of the PA is to achieve a scientific understanding of these experiences’ ([www.parapsych.org](http://www.parapsych.org)). Whilst I do not require the readers of *Revenant* to believe in the supernatural or even necessarily to keep an open mind, the historical questioning or exploration of the veracity of various unexplained phenomena is important. In fiction, in personal accounts, in ‘reality’, the truth of what is seen or felt is always one of the most crucial issues.

The Society for Psychical Research, York’s Anomalous Experience Research Unit and the Parapsychological Association all employ, at least in part, science and scientific

methodologies in their explorations of supernatural, paranormal or psychical phenomena or experiences. Science pushes the boundaries of the known and so do the mythological and the fantastical, tales and reports of the supernatural. There is wonder in science too and discussions of the supernatural often coincide with those of science (although this rarely happens the other way round). Science has discovered quarks, leptons and gluons and it theorizes about 'dark matter'. In quantum physics particles exist-and-not at the same time; they appear and disappear; light can be both a wave and a particle. Science brings sightings of strange new worlds such as Pluto and its moon-that-may-not-be-a-moon. It gives names to these worlds such as Charon, Titan, Io, Ganymede and Callisto; supernatural figures from mythology, legend and folklore.

Explorations of 'extra nature' are found in science, fictional representations and, for some people, personal experience. For Catherine Crowe the experience of the supernatural, the unexplained and the 'extra' of nature has always been apparent. She writes,

besides the numerous instances of such phenomena alluded to in history, which have been treated as fables by those who profess to believe the rest of the narratives, though the whole rests on the same foundation, that is, tradition and hearsay; besides these, there exists in one form or another, hundreds and hundreds of recorded cases in all countries, and in all languages, exhibiting that degree of similarity which mark them as belonging to a class of facts (*The Night Side of Nature*, 142).

Throughout human history, from all over the world, the supernatural has always been reported, discussed and mythologized. Crowe argues that it is an integral part of human culture and supernatural occurrences (or at least testimony of them) are far more frequent than we think. Whether we believe or not, whether we are unsure, sceptical or downright cynical, supernatural phenomena, fictionalised or reported, are an important part of all cultures. The very fact that the actual 'other worlds' of Space have been colonized by mythological naming attests to the reach of the supernatural – it has literally gone beyond our world, pushing the limits of what we can endure and what we can see.

However it manifests the supernatural demands attention; it *affects* us. Theories of Affect come from cultural geography, yet I want to promote the usefulness of the concept of affect for examining the supernatural. Affect theory looks at the bodily immersion in and response to landscape, place and space, which Patricia Clough cites as 'a substrate of potential bodily

responses, often automatic responses, in excess of consciousness' (2007, 2). The idea of an experience being 'in excess of consciousness' resonates deeply with the experience of haunting or a brush with the supernatural be it 'real' or from fictional texts. The body itself responds to horror, terror and wonder. There is an immanence of experience whether one is watching a film, reading a book or experiencing something unexplainable, uncanny or weird. For it to be recognised at all, supernatural phenomena needs a witness, some form of human agency to testify to its presence or being. Without an interpretive presence why might it be classed as 'super' natural at all? Without a witness, the supernatural might, in the end, just be the natural. For a house to be designated as haunted there has to be someone to recognise it as such, otherwise it merely exists as it is; neither haunted or not. The supernatural needs human intervention in order for it to be supernatural. Human presence and the human body itself in its response to the supernatural must always be implicated. The supernatural is a human phenomenon.

*Revenant* will tap into the deep wells of human experience, creativity, scientific endeavour and thought about the supernatural. Welcoming both critical, scholarly material and creative work *Revenant* will expand and enrich the discussion of the supernatural. *Revenant* in this issue and in those to come will explore how the supernatural is always deeply implicated in society, history, creativity, science and culture.

Ruth Heholt, November 2015

## **Dedication**

Thanks are given to all members of editorial board of *Revenant*, to the contributors, to the dedicated editorial team and to our army of peer reviewers. Grateful thanks to Falmouth University for funding the creation of the website and Matt Collins and Keryn Bibby for building and designing it.

## List of References

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